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Leggett makes another attempt at ambulance fee to pay for fire service

Volunteer firefighters oppose it, council divided on issue

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Multimedia:



[Click here to see Leggett discuss the budget proposal](#)

Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) says the county could generate about \$14.7 million in fiscal 2011 through an ambulance fee that is part of his proposed budget.

However, the county's volunteer firefighters are opposed to it, saying the \$450 fee will cost lives. And the County Council appears divided on the issue.

If the council does not approve the fee as part of the county's budget, county spokesman Patrick Lacefield said the council will either have to raise taxes to generate revenue or cut programs and services.

An ambulance fee has been discussed for years, and as recently as last year was said to be a \$300 to \$800 bill for using ambulance services, which would be paid for by insurance companies.

On Monday, Leggett said the fee would be \$450 and would not be charged to county residents. Insurance companies, he said, would still pay the fee.

Leggett said the fee could have generated as much as \$50 million in revenue by now if the council had approved it about three years ago. The council also voted it down last year with a 5-3 vote. Current Council President Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park abstained at the time.

On Monday, Floreen said she supports the ambulance fee.

The county's Volunteer Fire Rescue Association is prepared to take the issue to referendum if the council approves the fee, according to Eric N. Bernard, executive director of the association, which represents 1,700 active volunteers and about 500 retired members.

"I'm continually miffed as to why we have not passed that," Leggett told the council Monday, referring to the fee.

"The EMS fee will be billed directly to an individual's health insurance, Medicaid or Medicare. Because county residents already pay taxes to support EMS service, no county resident will pay a dime, or even receive a bill. No county resident who is unable to pay will have any out-of-pocket expense for transport to the hospital," Leggett said in a news release.

However, Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg said Leggett is not considering administrative costs involved in the ambulance fee and that the actual revenue generated from the fee would be less than the \$62.2 million Leggett is projecting over the next four years.

He also disputes whether insurance companies would really pay the fee — or whether they would pass the increased cost onto their customers.

"I don't remember when insurance companies became charities," Andrews said. "They will recoup that cost one way or another. There is no free lunch here."

Andrews called the fee "bad policy," and said it would likely cause people to think twice before calling 911.

The county's volunteer firefighters agree, Bernard said.

"The bottom line is that it risks people's lives," he said of the fee. "When someone has to pay for something, they use it less. We're fearful that if just one resident, one guest to the county doesn't call 911 when they need it, that it could cost somebody their life."

Lacefield said Tuesday that no evidence shows an ambulance fee, which is in place in neighboring jurisdictions, has harmed public health.

"Not having the resources costs lives," he said.